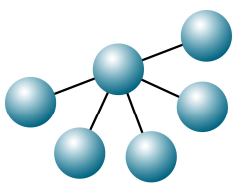
Museums Libraries & Archives

What do the public want from libraries?

Summary report of qualitative research

November 2010



SHARED INTELLIGENCE

Ipsos MORI
Social Research Institute

1. Introduction

1.1. Shared Intelligence and Ipsos MORI were commissioned in July 2010 to carry out research into public library users and non-users, for the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA).

1.2. A desk review formed the first stage of this project. The second phase was qualitative research with users, non-users and lapsed users. We carried out 12 focus groups in August and September 2010, covering four different local authority areas.

1.3. This summary report sets out key findings from the focus groups. A more detailed analysis, synthesising findings from the three phases of the project, is set out in our full research report, available at http://research.mla.gov.uk/.

Outline of methodology

1.4. A wide ranging topic guide was used, based on key issues that emerged from the initial desk review. Topics included: current use of library services, awareness of the range of services, experience of and satisfaction with the current offer, motivations for use and non-use, barriers to greater use; changing patterns of usage over time and likelihood of future usage; suggestions for improvements; perceptions of the value of library services as a public service and to the wider community.

1.5. Participants were recruited by experienced local Ipsos MORI recruiters, using a mix of in-street or 'free find' recruitment and targeting from library services' membership databases. We are grateful to the library services and MLA for facilitating access to this data.

1.6. Users, non-users and lapsed users were defined for recruitment purposes as follows:

- **User** - someone who is a member of a library, considers themself to be a user, and has used some library services in the last year.
- **Non-user** - someone who is not a member of a library, does not consider themself to be a user, and has not used any library services in the last five years.
- **Lapsed user -** defined as someone who is a member of a library but has not used any library services in the last year.

1.7. Our sampling strategy was constructed in order to reach members of the public in each of the four MLA regions; in different types of area (rural, urban etc); and with different current usage patterns. Recruitment was targeted to ensure a broadly representative cross section of participants reflective of the local population. We specifically targeted three key groups that previous research suggested might have a distinct relationship with library services (parents with young children; employed people; and non-employed people). We also targeted older people, as they had not been well represented in previous qualitative research, despite quantitative research finding that they were the age group most likely to be regular library users.

1.8. Each group was mixed in terms of gender, and had loose quotas for age and work status (where a specific age group/employment type was not being targeted), and ethnicity. Overall, turnout at focus groups was good (9-12 people attended each one) and a wide range of people from different backgrounds participated.

1.9. The final focus group sample is set out in the grid below.

Figure 1.1: Focus groups sampling grid

		County	**County**	**City**	**London borough**
	MLA region[1]	*North*	*East*	*West*	*London*
Users	*Geography* *Demography*	Rural Mixed		Urban Mixed	Urban Older people
Non-users	*Geography* *Demography*		Rural Older people	Suburban Mixed	Urban Mixed
Lapsed users	*Geography* *Demography*	Industrial town Mixed	Market town Mixed	City centre Mixed	
Mixed users and non-users	*Geography* *Demography*	Industrial town Parents with young children	Market town Employed full and part time		Urban Unemployed

1.10. A full description of the methodology used is given in the Technical Report which accompanies this document.

[1] *The MLA regions are aggregations of English government office regions. They are North (covering the North East, North West and Yorkshire & Humber); West (West Midlands and South West); East (East of England, East Midlands and South East); and London.*

2. Overall findings

2.1. Most participants were positive about library services overall. They valued them as public services, and tended to think that it was important that they remained free for all to use. Even those who did not use libraries tended to think they were a "good thing", if not relevant to them personally. They did not tend to have negative feelings towards libraries generally, although they might criticise certain aspects of the service, such as the quality of the book offer, or the perceived attitudes of staff.

2.2. While some user groups were very satisfied with current library services, there was a feeling from many users (as well as non- or lapsed users) that current library services were in need of improvement. Within some groups, there was also a sense that libraries were a tired service (libraries, for example, were "shabby" or "down at heel") and perhaps anachronistic - for example, the DVD offer was seen by some as outdated.

2.3. There was variation in findings between the four local authority areas, suggesting that the local library service, and the characteristics of a local area (urban, rural) made a difference to people's views. In a rural county area, for example, libraries were highly valued as a community focus point. In a city, smaller community libraries were preferred to the central library, while in another urban area, users were likely to use a range of libraries, including the large flagship library and smaller, local libraries.

3. Why do people use libraries?

3.1. When asked, current library users gave a variety of reasons why they used libraries. However, in doing this, they tended not to differentiate between the services they used when they visited libraries and their underlying motivations for using libraries.

3.2. The focus groups were designed to draw out these distinctions and to understand the incentives and motivations for library use – as well as to explore which services were used by different groups.

What did people use libraries for?

3.3. Users in our sample most commonly used libraries for:

- Book borrowing – this was the most commonly-used service amongst all demographic groups, and virtually all of the users in our focus groups borrowed books, either for themselves or for their children. Books were widely seen as the most important part of the library offer. Most groups, however, also took advantage of a range of other library services.
- Computers and the internet – some used computers at the library to access the internet, if they didn't have this at home, for recreation, research, checking email/Facebook and job searching. Parents described how their teenage children used computers in libraries to do their homework. Some older users also taken part in computer courses.
- Children's activities – parents with young children spoke highly of organised children's activities such as Baby Bounce and Rhyme, Storytime, activities related to the Summer Reading Challenge and children's craft sessions.
- Study space – users of all ages took advantage of the quiet space that libraries offered for researching and studying.

3.4. Most of the people who took part in focus groups had not used online library services extensively. Some renewed books online and/or used online catalogues, but even amongst user groups, many people were not aware they could do this.

3.5. Few had used e-books, although some (including some older people) were interested in doing this, and some had rented DVDs and borrowed audio books. There was some enthusiasm for more use of audio books, particularly amongst parents with young children, who thought these would be good for car journeys and a good way of "getting into the classics".

3.6. Some people had used libraries occasionally or sporadically for specific purposes, but had never really considered themselves library users. For instance, one lady had used the library (reference books, the computers, photocopiers) to prepare for an interview, and another man had used the library to complete a Learndirect course.

Incentives for use

3.7. The focus groups highlighted a range of reasons why people choose to use libraries.

A better option than alternatives

3.8. For some groups of users, libraries had an edge over other sources of similar services or activities.

3.9. Some users felt that libraries beat the competition on quality of the service offer. For a group of older library users in a rural area, the range of books offered by their library was said to be better than on the high street, as it was "not just bestsellers". However, other users often felt that libraries needed to improve their range of books, so it was clear that libraries were not always strong in this area.

3.10. When staff were felt to be friendly and knowledgeable, this also gave libraries a competitive advantage. Users in less affluent parts of a city felt that good customer service was a key reason why they preferred (local) libraries to alternatives, while older users in a rural area described how staff at their local libraries would get to know them and make recommendations around books they might like.

3.11. Importantly, of course, the fact that libraries were free was a big incentive to many users, making library use cheaper than alternatives. This was a particular benefit for users from lower income groups, and for people who borrowed a lot of books (who were often older people).

"For pensioners [it's] a question of money. You can't afford to buy every book you read." Library user, older person, rural area

3.12. Another important incentive was the fact that the library offered a quiet, relaxing, safe space. For parents, libraries offered a "space to concentrate", which they and their children could not get at home. They were also seen as a safe space where parents could let their children go on their own. Younger adults used libraries for the study space and because at libraries there were fewer distractions than at home. Both parents and older people often saw the library as a good place to

socialise and meet others. Libraries' non-exclusivity - the fact that "anyone can walk in" – was picked out as an important incentive by users in a less affluent area.

"At home I can't concentrate, I'll just get up and make a brew whereas in the library…" Library user, parent, rural area

Unique services

3.13. Libraries also offered some services that users simply couldn't get elsewhere. For example, for those studying (of all ages), access to reference books was an important reason to visit the library. While people studying at universities sometimes questioned why others used public libraries for study, it was clear that people doing distance learning, studying at school or college, or studying/researching on their own really valued access to reference works in public libraries.

"If you need information, it's a nice place to start". Library user, urban area

3.14. Some users spoke of their delight at being able to "order any book", and in particular, expensive books that they would never have been able to afford otherwise. One user described ordering a book that would have cost £200, only took two weeks to arrive, and hadn't been borrowed since 1979. Again, this was often a real incentive for people needing particular books for study purposes.

"I find one of the most amazing thing about libraries that you can order amazingly specialised books." Library user, rural area

3.15. Free use of the internet was also seen as unique, and a real incentive for those who didn't have this at home.

3.16. The opportunity that libraries provided for children to get involved in activities and more generally, to help them develop a love of reading, were strong incentives for parents. (Both users and non-users commonly suggested that more activities for children would improve library services.)

How they make you feel

3.17. Library users on the whole used positive words to describe how the library made them feel the last time they visited: "relaxed", "happy", satisfied – "I found what I wanted", "grateful", "welcome".

3.18. Users tended also to like the library environment, the fact it was friendly and clean, and to feel comfortable there. Users across age groups also sometimes mentioned

how libraries offered a space where it was okay to 'be on their own' or indeed a space that felt like 'their own'.

"Libraries are a haven for some people." Library user, urban area

"It's like a sanctuary." Library user, rural area

[Libraries are] "a place of tranquillity and focus." Library user, industrial town

Convenience

3.19. The importance of convenience as an incentive for library use was not always expressed in these terms, but frequently came up when users talked about periods when they had stopped using libraries so often, or were prompted about why they did not use larger, central libraries. Opening hours were discussed in every focus group, and the need for convenient opening hours consistently underlined. This was important for all demographic groups, but particularly for those who were working or who had children.

3.20. Libraries were also described as a reliable, convenient 'fall-back option' for people, particularly from lower-income groups, looking for an activity outside the house.

"I know if I'm really stuck for something to do, we can go and she'll enjoy it." Library user, parent, industrial town

Underlying motivations for use

3.21. The discussions drew out a number of reasons for usage that could be described as 'underlying motivations'. These concerned the role libraries played in people's lives, their personal or 'spiritual' motivations for using libraries.

3.22. The key motivation for many was a love of reading. Some users also described the opportunities for "discovery" that libraries offered – both in terms of finding out new knowledge, and finding new writers or works of fiction that they wouldn't otherwise have come across. These motivations could apply to any age group, including those in employment. Further, although some individuals used libraries for practical purposes (e.g. job hunting on the internet), they often described their primary motivations as relating to reading and finding out new things.

"I absolutely love the library. It's got me interested in things that I wouldn't think I would be interested in." Library user, market town

3.23. Education was also a strong motivation for users in most of the groups, particular amongst parents, young people, and people in middle age groups. Virtually all

users (and non-users) thought that libraries had a key role to play in children's education, and parents often used libraries to help their children learn. Adults were also motivated to use the library for study or 'self-betterment'. This could be as part of formal learning, or for informal, interest purposes.

"If you need information, it's a nice place to start". Library user, urban area

3.24. Finally, a really important motivation to use libraries was their value as a destination. Libraries offered older people the opportunity to get out of the house, meet others and catch up on local news. For those in rural areas and people who may be experiencing isolation, libraries were seen as a 'lifeline' in this regard. Meanwhile, for those with busy lifestyles, such as parents, going to the library meant they could have some time to themselves.

"Bean counters don't understand the real value of a library. For people who live in villages on their own, [going to the library] is like an outing." Library user, older person, rural area

"The library is the hub of village – you get all the gossip. You get to know the librarians." Library users, rural area

What do people value in public libraries?

3.25. There were variations between groups in terms of the services most valued, but overall those that were most strongly valued were:

- Books - important amongst all user groups, and particularly important for older people; seen as libraries' core offer by most participants across all groups
- Children's activities - highlighted in most groups
- Access to the internet - not important for all groups, but very important for some, including mixed user groups, unemployed people and a number of older people.

3.26. The quality and range of the book offer came up as an issue in virtually all focus groups, with users and lapsed users both concerned about not being able to get the books they wanted in libraries. However, there were some divergent views - some groups wanted to be able to get hold of best sellers, saying this was difficult in their local libraries, and that they often had to buy these elsewhere instead. Other groups thought that too much space was given to bestsellers, and that there needed to be more "quality reads" or classics available. Some participants talked about a lack of depth in the offer, and the difficulty of finding specialist reference material or a good range of genre fiction. There was a sense that the proportion of library space given over to books was declining and this was seen as a bad thing.

3.27. The importance of the library as a physical space also came up in every group, although the way it was used varied. In a rural area, and amongst older users in an urban area, for example, libraries were seen as important focal points in communities - although participants did not want to see them become "like community centres". The peace and tranquillity that libraries offered was widely valued. Libraries were seen to offer a unique type of space for study, for getting some peace and quiet, or for "ducking in out of the rain". Several groups, especially parents of young children, saw libraries as a safe space and somewhere where children could go on their own.

3.28. The value of helpful and welcoming staff also came out strongly in nearly all the focus groups. Some users perceived that standards of service had dropped recently, but most strongly praised the service delivered by staff in their local libraries.

3.29. Some services were seen as obsolete (or becoming so) by some participants:

- Some participants valued the DVD offer, saying it was much more affordable for them than alternatives such as Blockbuster. Others tended to think that it was pointless for libraries to offer DVDs as far better alternatives existed, such as LoveFilm.
- Older generations commented that they "grew up on books" and had always seen libraries as a place to find things out, but thought that younger generations would prefer to use the internet for reference. Younger participants also commented that if they had the internet at home, the need for a library was reduced.

"Your computer is your home library now" Non-user, suburban area

3.30. Participants tended to think that online services, e.g. reserving or renewing online, were a good thing, but few had used them.

3.31. There were mixed views on developments such as self-issue machines - some participants were strongly in favour of these, as these reduced queuing. Others, particularly older users, felt that they reduced the personal touch and found them "alienating".

3.32. In terms of the mix of services, several groups thought that services such as computers were fine, as long as they were "not to the detriment of books". Older users in particular thought that books were being "squeezed out". However, amongst several of the mixed age groups, there were users for whom use of the internet was a primary motivation for visiting a library.

Community libraries versus large, central or 'flagship' libraries

3.33. Preferences for larger versus smaller libraries depended on location. In an urban area, community libraries were much preferred to the central library, which drew consistent criticism from all groups as being "intimidating", "too big", "difficult to get to" and "difficult to find things in".

3.34. The personal service that staff in smaller libraries offered was highly valued by some users, especially older people. In another urban area, users in one group stressed the importance of local libraries and said that they would not use libraries if their local library shut down. However, in another focus group in the same area, users tended to visit a range of local libraries as well as the large, well equipped flagship library, which was also viewed very positively.

3.35. In contrast, in an industrial town, the Victorian county library was often referred to in a positive light even though most people also used local libraries.

4. Reasons for not using libraries

Lifestyle issues, preferences and different interests

4.1. In discussing reasons for non-use, lifestyle issues came out more strongly than access barriers, on the whole. These included:

- Being too busy, with work or children, not prioritising libraries
- Preferring to use alternatives, for example buying books, renting DVDs online, going to coffee shops for a relaxing place to read
- Not enjoying reading or seeing libraries as offering anything particularly attractive

4.2. Some non-users preferred to buy books, either because they preferred to own books than borrow them, or (more commonly) because they preferred the convenience of supermarkets, online retailers and bookshops. Some said that they couldn't get bestsellers or recent releases in public libraries, and this was a reason for going elsewhere. Others could not find the specialist reference material that they wanted.

"The library has nothing to offer me - if I read for pleasure I buy off the internet - maybe later in life." Lapsed user, urban area

4.3. Alongside a preference for book buying was a preference to spend leisure time in different sorts of environments than most libraries offer - or are perceived to offer. Some non-users in our focus groups commented that the library environment seemed poor quality, or 'low value'. Libraries were sometimes described by non-users as "shabby", "down-at-heel" and "not inviting".

4.4. Some non- or lapsed users said that they would try libraries now that they knew more about what was on offer, but others still thought that libraries were not relevant to them.

"I still wouldn't use it - my life's too hectic." Non-user, urban area

"Nothing really attracts me to it – seems boring." Non-user, urban area

"I don't blame the libraries for me not wanting to use them - I blame me for not wanting to read." Lapsed user, market town

Barriers to access

4.5. Although lifestyle issues, preferences and different interests were more frequently mentioned as reasons for not using libraries, barriers to access also came up in all groups. Some non- and lapsed users said they would use libraries if they were more conveniently located (and had done so before their local library had closed, or before they had moved jobs). Opening hours were discussed in all groups, with users and non-users alike thinking that opening hours could be improved. Cost of getting to the library - transport and parking - was also raised in our focus groups as a barrier to use by some users and non-users. Parking and lack of public transport were issues in rural areas and in urban areas, when discussing getting to city centre locations.

"The town centre library might as well be on Mars for me." Lapsed user, industrial town

4.6. Where mobile services were mentioned in our qualitative research, they were valued, but it was common for people to say that they were unsure when they were available or if they were still available, or to comment on limited availability. One participant in an older persons' focus group, for example, used to use the mobile service. However, because it only stopped for ten minutes she was unable to browse at leisure and was repeatedly getting books home to discover she had already read them. She also said that as the mobile only visited fortnightly, and now monthly, that if she had an appointment that day she would have to wait a month for a new book.

Poor prior experiences

4.7. Some ‘lapsed users’ had been regular library users, but had stopped using libraries because they found they could not get what they wanted. Primarily, this was because they found the range or choice of books to be limited - they could not find books that were interesting, met specialist requirements, or were current bestsellers. There were also ‘non-user’ participants who had tried libraries, but felt they could not find what they wanted. Both of these types of participant had since found alternatives, such as buying second-hand books, and tended to think that they would not use libraries again.

"There is a need for a public library system… it's just not working as it should be, as a public service, in the shape that it is." Lapsed user, industrial town

“[I’m] as likely to go back to using libraries as I am to sell my flat-screen TV and go back to black and white portable.” Lapsed user, industrial town

4.8. Most lapsed users who spoke of poor experiences related this to the range and quality of books, but some people also mentioned the way they were treated by staff. (This was relatively rare, though; on the whole, though, comments about library staff by current or lapsed users were positive.)

“I don’t really think of it as a social place… when you go into the library I’ve been told many times to keep my mouth shout, been told off.” Lapsed user, urban area

No ‘need’ for libraries

4.9. Some people’s life circumstances had changed, making it more difficult or less convenient for them to go to libraries. Common ‘triggers’ for lapsed usage included moving house or job to an area where libraries were less easy to get to.

4.10. Some people’s life stage had changed, removing their perceived ‘need’ for libraries. Common ‘triggers’ for lapsed usage included stopping studying or entering full-time work. People in these groups often thought that they may use libraries again in future. Having children or grandchildren, retiring, or entering unemployment were common triggers for reintroducing adults to libraries. This suggested that taking a ‘life course’ view might help in better understanding library usage patterns.

“Life got in the way I think – you had student life and you didn’t have time to read, then you started a new job.” Lapsed user, industrial town

“It’s more of an age group thing. As a child and when you get older. You have to think about your priorities- return to the library for them.” Lapsed user, urban area

"I would say there's a spell in your life when you haven't got time to go to the library. When we retired…[we] started to use the library." Lapsed user, urban area

"[I'll go back] possibly when I'm old and I've got more time but not when I'm working." Lapsed user, industrial town

4.11. Some people within these groups thought, on the other hand, that they wouldn't use libraries in future - not only had their life stage changed, but technology had move on and the library offer was therefore less relevant.

"Loads of people download...and they [music CDs] have come down in price… readily accessible anyway, and a lot cheaper than it used to be." Lapsed user, urban area

"Library was a phase I went through before I moved on to bookshops – if you want more up to date stuff then when you work etc you don't have time...not enough leisure time." Lapsed user, urban area

"Since most people have their own computers they use them to find out - you don't need libraries." Non-user, urban area

"When they first started to do it [offer DVDs for hire] it was relevant then, but the market's caught up." Lapsed user, urban area

5. Awareness of library services

5.1. Awareness of the range of services on offer was not as low as might have been expected. Between them, participants in each of the groups (user, lapsed and non-user) could list most of the services commonly available in libraries, and each group came up with a long list of services. It seemed that awareness of computer and internet access was high.

5.2. However, within most groups, some participants were surprised by some of the other services on offer. Commonly, these participants were unaware of support for researching their family history (e.g. access to genealogy software), the opportunity to buy second hand books in some libraries, web-based services (e.g. the online catalogue, inter-library loans) and some of the courses and activities on offer. There was some frustration amongst some users that they didn't know what was on offer - even though they went into libraries regularly.

"I'm flabbergasted at the range of things you can do there." Non-user, older person, rural area

5.3. Some participants in non-user groups were unaware of where their local library was - and in two groups there were comments about library signage being inadequate, so that it wasn't possible to recognise a building as a library. All groups thought that libraries should do more promotion and marketing.

"I don't know what libraries do you see….I get leaflets about pizzas come through my door…I don't get a leaflet about the library." Non-user, urban area

"It's a well kept secret where the library is." Lapsed user, urban area

"There isn't any point if nobody knows about it." Lapsed user, market town

5.4. Some non-users had negative perceptions of library staff. These seemed to be linked to ideas they held about public sector staff in general, and were not necessarily based on recent experience of going into libraries.

"[Library staff] don't seem to have to compete." Non-user, urban area

"Librarians aren't trained to be sales people." Non-user, urban area

"We could teach them [the staff] a few things about manners and personality." Non-user, older person, rural area

5.5. All groups recognised that libraries had changed over time, but there were variations between groups in terms of whether this was seen positively or negatively. A strong theme in both user and lapsed user groups was recognition of a tension between space for books and space for other activities and resources - with some thinking this was to the detriment of what they saw as the core service, and others liking the wider range of services now on offer.

"Libraries have come too far – books are taking second place." Library user, rural area

“You can’t put libraries in a time warp. They need to evolve.” Non-user, older person, rural area

5.6. However, amongst some non-user groups, libraries did not have a very high profile. A lack of communication and advertising from libraries seemed to contribute to this.

“I just don’t think about libraries”. Non-user, urban area

“I haven’t gone to my local one (or one in town) for a long time…[they should] advertise what they’re doing, what they’ve got- if I went past it I’d probably go in to check it out.” Lapsed user, urban area

6. Views on value of library services

Who are libraries for?

6.1. There was a strong perception, from virtually all the focus groups, that the groups of people who currently benefited most from library services were children, students, older people, and people on low incomes.

6.2. In terms of who library services should be for, some focus groups tended to think that libraries *should* be aimed at children and young people. For the parents' focus group, the perceived benefits of libraries for children were many and varied: they learn to read, socialising opportunities, parents can seek peace, additional activities, bonding between parents and children, good 'experience' for children, gives kids independence, they can concentrate on homework.

"If you take them before school age, they are not so daunted when they see a book in school". User, urban area

6.3. Older people, and people with young families, were particularly likely to say this. These groups tended to think that education was libraries' main purpose, and that they should be trying to get children in early, in order to support their education and build a love of reading. In suggesting improvements, participants in these groups tended to feel that schools should make better use of libraries, do more to promote library visits, and try to "get kids hooked for life".

"I think it's good for them [children] to explore and investigate in a physical world, not a virtual one." Library user, parent, industrial town

"I'm a little bit selfish – I'm trying to enforce my literary taste on children – haven't got them on Chekhov yet." Library user, parent, industrial town

6.4. Other groups thought that libraries should be for everyone, and commented that more should be done to target 'the middle groups' who were not currently using services.

What are libraries for?

6.5. The groups revealed some divergent views on libraries' primary purpose. Amongst some groups, particularly in urban areas, education - particularly children's education, but also self-improvement and learning - was seen as the main purpose of libraries.

"The job of the library should be to continually endeavour to get young people there - nothing can compare to holding a book – it's about getting young people and children reading." Non-user, older person, rural area

6.6. In rural areas and amongst some of the older people's groups, and amongst parents with young children, libraries' role as a community focal point was stressed.

6.7. More affluent groups, and older people, on the whole associated libraries more closely with leisure than learning. For some, it offered the chance of a 'day out'.

Identification with library services

6.8. The focus groups explored how far participants identified with libraries - whether they used them, and also whether they saw libraries as relevant to them. All participants in the 'user' groups strongly identified with libraries and most could be described as 'library fans'.

6.9. Amongst lapsed and non-users, though, there was variation in the findings:

- Some 'lapsed' users considered themselves never really to have been users. They had joined for a specific purpose (e.g. to borrow a piece of sheet music), and had not used libraries since.
- Others (both in the 'lapsed' and 'non-user' groups) were more likely to see themselves as "currently non-users", but thought that future use was likely when circumstances changed.
- Some 'lapsed' and non-users, as mentioned above, would not use libraries again.

6.10. We also found that some 'non-users' had in fact recently visited a library. These groups still saw themselves as 'non-users', however, because they had visited on someone else's behalf - to take children or grandchildren to activities, to pick up books for their partner, or to wait while their partner (normally female) browsed for books. These participants felt that their library use "didn't count".

"I go to the library but I take my children, I don't use it. I personally don't use it." Lapsed user, industrial town

Value of library services as a community service

6.11. Nearly all groups perceived that library usage was declining. Nevertheless, libraries were widely valued as public services, even by groups that were not current users. They were often seen as important - even central - to communities, and their role in bringing different community groups together was recognised.

"They provide an important community service… provide books for the readers, they provide the internet for people that don't have it, DVDs for someone that doesn't want to spend £4 for one night at Blockbuster, for old people who want to learn to use a computer and keep up with the young generation. Everything that they do is important for somebody in the community somewhere." Lapsed user, market town

"The library is essential to community – it adds cohesion to the village." Library user, older person, rural area

"In my library I see a lot of people come in. It's a large range of age groups… Bengalis turn up in big numbers… Chinese groups use it as a sort of drop-in." Library user, urban area

"As pubs and post offices close the library is the last throw of the dice." Library user, older person, rural area

6.12. Most focus groups thought that if libraries were no longer public services, this would disadvantage some groups in the population. Some of the focus group participants, particularly in less affluent areas, said that they themselves would be disadvantaged. In other areas, for example within more affluent groups in an urban area, there was more divergence of opinions.

"I think a lot of people would be sad if physical libraries were to go away." Lapsed user, industrial town

"Libraries don't matter as much as we'd like them to matter." Non-user, suburban area

6.13. Amongst some groups, there was also a sense that libraries were a national institution, and this was what made them important.

"Generally without a library [the town] would be a very sad place." Lapsed user, market town

"Libraries make a huge difference because it is important part of national life." Non-user, urban area

Should libraries be free?

6.14. Most groups felt strongly that library services should be free, even if they did not use libraries themselves. Reasons for this included:

- An ideological position - knowledge should not be the preserve of the rich. This view was particularly strong amongst lower income groups
- Not being able to afford to pay for books (particularly amongst lower income groups and older users who borrowed large numbers of books).
- Visiting a library isn't free once the cost of public transport and parking is taken into account. If you had to pay to join or use services, this would make libraries less attractive in relation to their competitors.
- A view that since people paid for libraries through council tax anyway, it was not fair to charge additional fees, and that "we should at least get something back for our council tax".

"[It's] very important that they are there for people who want to use them." Non-user, urban area

"[It's important libraries are free because] otherwise education is only going to be for the middle and upper classes - life will get even more imbalanced." Lapsed user, urban area

"We should at least get something back for our council tax." Library user, urban area

"I wouldn't be able to afford it if it was not free." Library user, urban area

6.15. At the same time, participants in several groups suggested that people who 'abuse' services, e.g. by not returning books on time, should pay more than they do already. In a number of groups, library fines were perceived to be very low, and there was no disincentive to late returns.

6.16. Some people would not mind paying for a 'premium' service, e.g. the ability to borrow more books at a time, or for specific activities or materials, such as the Summer Reading Challenge pack or craft sessions for children. Others suggested a membership scheme that would allow people to benefit from author readings, talks and so on. However, they would want to see any returns reinvested in the service.

"You would pay for certain services, as long as it is not extortionate, disproportionate." Library user, industrial town

"You would have to know any profits are going back into the library and not being swallowed up by the council." Library user, rural area

"I reckon a lot is being creamed off at the top and it's not getting to delivery, to the library assistants". Non-user, older person, rural area

6.17. Some participants questioned whether libraries should be free or whether they could be afforded in the current economic climate. Most, however, felt libraries offered good value for money.

"Superb." "Excellent." "For a free to use service it is incredible." "As an OAP with limited income I get to read the latest books – to buy they would cost £20." Library users' comments on whether libraries offer value for money, rural area

7. Service developments

7.1. The main suggestions for improvements, across all groups, were:

- Longer opening hours: mentioned by all groups
- Coffee shops: mentioned by most groups
- Better book offer: important for users and lapsed users
- Staff training: more important for non-users, perhaps not based on recent experience
- More advertising/promotion, particularly to get children and younger people into libraries: commonly mentioned across all groups

7.2. **Current users** often said that a range of "small changes" would improve their experience – for example, reducing queues for computers or making the environment more welcoming. Overall, current library users were quite satisfied with the service, so while they had suggestions for improvements, they did not want to see fundamental changes to the way services were delivered. As one focus group participant commented (to wide agreement from the group), "don't fix it if it's not broken".

"A lot of the things we're talking about aren't about spending money – customer care, awareness." Lapsed user, market town

7.3. Nevertheless, they were keen for opening hours to be extended, and frequently mentioned concerns about the book offer. On the whole, most were satisfied with the library environment, and with the service they received from library staff.

7.4. The most frequent 'new technology' to be mentioned was e-books. Most current users had not used e-books, although some were interested in doing so. For example, an older lady in one of our focus groups commented that e-books would enable her to borrow more, because she could not carry many physical books. However, she felt she would need help from a library staff member to use e-books.

7.5. On the whole, though, current users were more likely to say that they liked "the actual book". In two focus groups, users suggested that the future of libraries would be electronic, and this was usually seen as a negative thing - though many people perceived 'e-books' to mean reading a book on a computer screen. Some commented, for example, that they wouldn't like e-books because they "liked to be able to read in bed".

"Libraries are being taken over by electronic media." Library user, urban area

7.6. Some users also expressed concern at developments that would compromise the 'quiet space' provided by libraries, and were keen that libraries should not be "like community centres". This highlights that developments that might be attractive to some audiences, could put off some others.

7.7. **Non- and lapsed users** tended to have more ideas about how the service could be developed in future. Some lapsed users thought that new types of events or activities, such as 'meet the author' events, might help 'entice' them back. They also tended to think that more pro-active advertising, market research and improvements, would be needed to draw them in. It was clear that most people in these focus groups would not actively seek libraries out (at least, not at this point in their lives) so that to attract, libraries would need to make a clear effort to be reaching out to people like them.

"Seems to me that you've got to find a way of making me want to take my kids there." Lapsed user, industrial town

"They need to find out what people actually want [like what we're doing now] – that's what a business would do." Lapsed user, industrial town

"A speaker, discussion groups - like-minded groups … interested in, I don't know, art and crafts - or even use a room for a hobby related to books you want to borrow." Lapsed user, urban area

"[Open days would show] somebody thinks it's important enough to want to encourage people like me [middle aged man] along". Non-user, urban area

7.8. Some suggested that libraries should capitalise on their unique attributes, and try harder to differentiate themselves from the competition.

"Here's my idea – have different libraries specialising in different areas of collections." Non-user, urban area

7.9. Lapsed and non-users sometimes supported innovations in the way services were delivered. For example, in two of our focus groups, participants discussed moving libraries to 'non-traditional' locations. Some participants also suggested that libraries should share buildings, with the Citizens' Advice Bureau, GPs, etc. Another group thought that locating libraries in other buildings, e.g. pubs and shops, could be sensible, but this should be "targeting a need, rather than creating a need that doesn't exist".

"If you had a big library, right next to a supermarket [that would make it more accessible] …. Parents who are not taking the children [to the library] but they've all been to Morrison's or Sainsbury's." Lapsed user, industrial town

8. Emerging conclusions and implications

8.1. Issues highlighted in the qualitative research included:

- The challenge in meeting all groups' needs at once, particularly when libraries offer limited physical space
- The tension around trying to attract new users without alienating existing users - given that existing and new users may have different needs and preferences
- The importance of the book offer and the strong view that the quality and range of stock needs to be improved
- The importance of the physical space of the library for most users - which suggests that possible alternatives to traditional libraries, such as social networks for book lending, would only partly meet needs and would not fulfil the range of roles that libraries play in people's lives

8.2. The research also suggests that the user/non-user/lapsed user distinction may not be particularly helpful - in practice, these were fluid definitions and the groups were far from homogeneous. 'Imposed' definitions, such as defining someone as a lapsed user on the basis of not using a library in the last year, did not correlate well with people's own perceptions of their library usage. Further, current usage patterns were not always a good predictor of views on libraries, and there were several consistencies across groups - for example, on the value of libraries as a free public service, and on the groups most likely to benefit from library services.

8.3. The groups also suggested that it is likely that there are quite a lot of people who do make use of library services, but think that their usage 'doesn't count' because they do not go in to borrow books. For example, people who took their grandchildren to children's activities, or who read the papers while their partner was borrowing books, did not consider that they had used libraries. As such, in national surveys such as Taking Part, it might be worth asking when people last went into a library (as well as specifying that online usage also 'counts', although this did not come up as strongly in our research).

Museums, Libraries
& Archives Council

Grosvenor House
14 Bennetts Hill
Birmingham B2 5RS

T +44 (0)121 345 7300
F +44 (0)121 345 7303

info@mla.gov.uk
www.mla.gov.uk

Leading strategically, we promote best practice in museums, libraries and archives, to inspire innovative, integrated and sustainable services for all.

SHARED INTELLIGENCE

Ipsos MORI
Social Research Institute

ISBN 000-0-000000-00-0
© MLA 2010-03-03
Registered Charity No: 1079666